

Gross National Happiness (GNH) on social media platforms

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Abstract:

Gross National Happiness is a term coined by the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1970s and it has been in use ever since. GNH is Bhutan's great promotional tool which is mentioned in books, brochures and other forms of communication. That communication until recently utilized predominantly traditional media, however nowadays most knowledge is gathered from electronic interactions.

Therefore, this paper aims to see if and how the term Gross National Happiness is present on social media platforms such as Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Periscope, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Vine, and YouTube. Results of this research might be useful for those responsible for creating Bhutan's image on the Internet.

Keywords: Gross National Happiness, GNH, social media

INTRODUCTION

Bhutan is a small country in the Himalayas which for many centuries existed in self-proclaimed isolation, however recently it opened up and participates in the modern communication process, which is greatly influenced by Gross National Happiness (GNH) "a term coined by (...) the Fourth King of Bhutan, Jigme Singye Wangchuck in 1970s. The concept implies that sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress and give equal importance to non-economic aspects of wellbeing"¹. For many years, GNH was getting traction and have been thought-provoking public relations term that couldn't have been avoided when describing Bhutan.

That small Himalayan Kingdom recently entered a process of sweeping changes that have reorganized many aspects of society. In 1999 as one of the last countries in the world, Bhutan introduced television and the Internet, that had a huge impact on lives of

¹ *GNH Index*, <http://www.grossnationalhappiness.com/articles/>, access: 29.12.2015.

Bhutanese people. Also huge changes happened in politics – Fourth King decided to abdicate the throne in his son's favor, and the political system was changed from absolute monarchy to constitutional monarchy². Private media were encouraged and digital communication flourished. Currently, most Bhutanese own a cell phone and have access to global information. There is a public debate on whether Bhutan authorities should still influence media outlets or leave them without any control. The first viewpoint prevails.

Nowadays most information is being gathered from the Internet and, therefore, it is important to see how GNH is presented there. Whereas GNH is well represented in the Google search engine (around 1 080 000³ hits) it is worth seeing how GNH is represented on social media sites and applications. It should be noted that study of certain traits on social media is a popular and fruitful trend in recent academic research, however, it has rarely or never been done when GNH is concerned.

METHODOLOGY

Firstly, to determine which social media to research I typed the phrase “most popular social platforms 2015” and picked the first three websites from displayed results. I consulted Social Media Today – website that provides “the World's 21 most important social media sites and apps in 2015”⁴, most important social platforms according to Global Web Index⁵, and portal “Statista”⁶ that provides leading social networks worldwide, ranked by a number of active users. Out of that three databases, I selected the following: Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Periscope, Pinterest, Reddit, Snapchat, Tumblr, Twitter, Vine, YouTube. The main criteria were their

² Sonam Kinga, *Polity, Kingship, and Democracy. A Biography of the Bhutanese State*, Thimphu 2009; Damchu Lhendup, *One Hundred Years of Development*, Thimphu 2014.

³ *GNH*, https://www.google.pl/webhp?sourceid=chrome-instant&ion=1&espy=2&es_th=1&ie=UTF-8#safe=off&q=GNH, access: 28.12.2015.

⁴ *The World's 21 most important social media sites and apps in 2015*, Social Media Today, <http://www.socialmediatoday.com/social-networks/2015-04-13/worlds-21-most-important-social-media-sites-and-apps-2015>, access: 17.12.2015.

⁵ *Top 15 social platforms: membership, visitation and active usage*, GWI Social. Summary. GlobalWebIndex's quarterly report on the latest trends in social networking, http://www.globalwebindex.net/hubfs/Reports/GWI_Social_Report_-_Q3_2015_Summary.pdf?t=1450261705739&utm_campaign=Insight+Reports&utm_source=hs_automation&utm_medium=email&utm_content=22078263&_hsenc=p2ANqtz-3sMuEsB1ViNHbDMZ9zzfSAegBoRKIXo28dZDupFjfcoqLh5JoWxuwmrnKdMRXRCIxuo0EUvUfT2IOOHVHrbho2c1Bg&_hsmi=22078263, access: 17.12.2015.

⁶ N.p., *Leading social networks worldwide as of November 2015, ranked by number of active users (in millions)*, The Statista Portal, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>, access: 17.12.2015.

repetitiveness in all three mentioned above inventories and their availability in English⁷. The data was gathered in the last week of December 2015.

This paper is mainly based on quantitative methods. I first searched the phrase “Gross National Happiness” and then “GNH” in the mentioned above social media channels. Both the full term and its abbreviation were essential in the search process because the search results often differ depending on what is being searched. I did not delve deeply into the contents of what has been written, however when noting down I took notice if they were relevant or not, which is mentioned in the conclusion.

The results section is divided into smaller parts that correspond with an appropriate social media platform. After a short description of social media channel, the frequency of distribution of search terms is given. In some cases, the exact number of results was numbered however in others it was not. In that case, when the number was over 100 I used the symbol >100.

When search phrase Gross National Happiness or GNH did not yield any results, “Bhutan” was searched to see if any manifestation of this Himalayan Kingdom is present, in particular social platform.

It is worth noting that it is very difficult to compare results in various different social media platforms because each of them is focused on something different (for example YouTube on video, whereas Twitter mostly on text), and sometimes it is even impossible to comb through archives since certain applications do not archive posts of their users, i.e. Snapchat. So in this research only presence of GNH or Gross National Happiness is inspected, however only from that data, one may deduct many insightful conclusions.

RESULTS

Below are the results of the search in all the different social media platform. Short description of each new media channel was provided to enhance the understanding among readers that may not be familiar with all the social media platforms.

⁷ There were very popular Chinese social media platforms such as Weibo or Renren and it was impossible to research them due to the fact that they were not in English.

Facebook – founded in 2004 is a world's most popular social networking platform that enables to share text, videos, music and many more. It's influential and appealing to all age groups⁸.

If one goes on Facebook one may search for whatever information there is available, just like in Google search. Facebook also uses similar sorting method, dividing results into categories: top, latest, people, photos, videos, pages, places, and more (groups, apps, events).

When searching Gross National Happiness, the following results were displayed: latest 0, people 0, photos >100 (mostly relevant), videos 5, pages 3, places 7, groups 36, apps 0, events 32. When searching GNH: latest >100, people >100, photos >100, videos 6, pages 24, places >100, groups >100, apps 2, events 89.

Google+ – is a social networking service from the search potentate Google. "The idea is pretty similar to other social networking service, but Google attempts to differentiate Google+ by allowing more transparency in who you share with and how you interact"⁹.

Google+ have results that divided into categories mentioned below. When searching GNH one gets following results: people and pages >100, collections 4, communities 5, photos >100, hangouts 0, events 8. When searching Gross National Happiness: people and pages >100, collections 1, communities 5, photos >100, hangouts 0, events 10.

Instagram – a visual social platform that allows its users to share pictures and short video clips. Thanks to the use of various filters it gained popularity first among the youngest generation however later it spread to other age groups¹⁰.

When typed in researched phrases¹¹ we get the following: gnh¹² – 4 738 posts, grossnationalhappiness – 1 351 posts.

⁸ *Company info*, Facebook, <http://newsroom.fb.com/company-info/>, access: 29.12.2015.

⁹ *Google+*, Google, <http://google.about.com/od/p/g/Google-plus.htm>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹⁰ *FAQ*, Instagram, <https://www.instagram.com/about/faq/>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹¹ Search conducted on: 17.12.2015.

¹² The system in Instagram changes capitalized search terms into not capitalized.

LinkedIn – “largest professional network on the Internet with more than 400 million members in over 200 countries and territories”¹³. Professionals use this service to present their portfolio and reach colleagues or potential employers.

When searched for GNH, one receives following results¹⁴: people 390, jobs 0, companies 23, groups 4, universities 0, posts 108. When searched for Gross National Happiness: people 911, jobs 0, companies 13, groups 4, universities 0, posts 393 183.

Periscope – a live video streaming application that allows users to broadcast their content. When going live one’s followers are notified and if the broadcast is liked it is rewarded with hearts¹⁵. Periscope firstly just a novelty but now is used also by journalists and reporters who do not anymore need a technical background to report from remote parts of the planet.

After typing Gross National Happiness, one account displayed, when GNH, 20 users show up. There is no difference about the content only the phrase itself is being researched.

Pinterest – “a visual bookmarking tool that helps you discover and save creative ideas”¹⁶. The user can “pin” pictures to their walls and create unique portfolios. They can also swap ideas and comment on each other ideas.

There are >100 pins when searched for GNH but it mostly yields irrelevant results. The whole phrase Gross National Happiness (>100) brings more accurate results.

Reddit – entertainment, social networking and news platform that allows registered users post, comment and up/downvote other users posts. Reddit advertises itself as “the front page of the Internet”¹⁷ and is divided into threads and subthreads.

There is a thread called GNH which has 12 readers and only 9 posts in the thread which for enormous and global Reddit culture is very small amount.

¹³ *About us*, LinkedIn, <https://press.linkedin.com/about-linkedin>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹⁴ Research done on: 19.12.2015

¹⁵ *Periscope*, iTunes Preview, <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/periscope/id972909677?mt=8>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹⁶ *Pinterest*, Google Play, <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.pinterest&hl=en>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹⁷ *Reddit*, <https://www.reddit.com/>, access: 29.12.2015.

Snapchat – “a fast and fun way to share experiences with your friends and the world around you. You can send a photo or video Snap to friends, chronicle your day through My Story, touch base using Chat, immerse yourself in global events through Live, and enjoy handcrafted stories from the world’s top publishers on Discover”¹⁸. Snapchat is the most popular among the youngest users of Internet.

There is no presence of GNH or Gross National Happiness phrase on Snapchat. There is only 1 user named “Bhutan”. It’s difficult to do research on Snapchat because everything disappears after one day. On the other hand, presence on Snapchat is crucial nowadays especially since it’s so popular among the youngest generation.

Tumblr – social networking website and microblogging platform allows its users to upload various kinds of media (music, text, pictures, lyrics, HTML and many more). Most popular with teens and university students¹⁹. When search both Gross National Happiness and GNH the same amount results came up in the search: profiles >100, people >100.

Twitter – most popular in the world microblogging platform used especially by politicians, journalists, and celebrities. Unlike other social media outlets “where members need to approve social connections, anyone can follow anyone on public Twitter”²⁰. Members can use so-called hashtags – # to weave conversation together.

When typed in Gross National Happiness and GNH more than 100 photos and more that 100 videos are displayed, however, there is a difference in the amount of accounts containing interesting us term: 8 to 108 respectively.

Vine – video sharing service that enables users to record (the camera records only when users press the screen, which allows for instant edits and stop-motion effects) and post short, looping video clips that later can be uploaded to other social media²¹.

¹⁸ *Snapchat*, <https://www.snapchat.com/privacy>, access: 29.12.2015.

¹⁹ *Tumblr*, <https://www.tumblr.com/about>, access: 28.12.2015.

²⁰ *Definition Twitter*, <http://whatistechtarget.com/definition/Twitter>, access: 29.12.2015.

²¹ *Vine*, <https://vine.co/>, access: 28.12.2015.

The search for GNH brings only video clips (219)²² irrelevant to the research subject. And the whole phrase Gross National Happiness bring 0 hits. 115 hits when searched Bhutan, and only 57 posts with hashtag Bhutan. The most popular is a video of King announcing the pregnancy of his wife²³.

YouTube – most popular video sharing platform in the world. It gathers to both amateurs and professional broadcasters. YouTube is used as a source of revenue, and as a promotional outlet; it “provides a forum for people to connect, inform, and inspire others across the globe and acts as a distribution platform²⁴”.

When typed Gross National Happiness – around 7 030 hits are displayed whereas GNH brings 13 500 hits.

CONCLUSION

Nowadays the majority of communication is conducted online and presence on social media platforms is a must for those that want to be seen. Bhutan as such a small, and still developing country needs to grasp all the possible, and often inexpensive tools to promote itself. This Himalayan Kingdom thanks to very attractive and catchy phrase: Gross National Happiness coined by the Fourth King is perceived globally as the last Shangri-La, last paradise on Earth, with happy people living there. Moreover “the low volume and high value tourism” policy plays a crucial role in Bhutan’s portrayal since wealthy tourist are only shown the positive sides of Bhutan, which is represented in their pictures, videos, and memories shared on social media platforms.

One observation that can be noted is in which social platform GNH is popular and in which it isn’t. To those with high GNH content, one may include following platforms: Facebook, Google+, Instagram, LinkedIn, Pinterest, Tumblr, Twitter, YouTube, whereas to those with low GNH saturation include: Periscope, Reddit, Snapchat, Vine.

Since it is impossible to influence tourists and locals (that with the developing ICT infrastructure are more and more present and active on the Internet) and tell them where to publish their posts, it is possible for the Government officials to engage in other, less popular platforms, such as Vine, Periscope or Snapchat. Moreover, government officials who are responsible for online communication should start using

²² Search conducted on 16.12.2015.

²³ Vine, <https://vine.co/tags/bhutan>, access: 29.12.2015.

²⁴ YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/>, access: 29.12.2015.

hashtag #GNH, therefore making it official. Thanks to that action average users may observe that action and start using it themselves. Such efforts could be more easily attained if the GNH was created as an official Bhutanese hashtag that would be used in all communication both formal and informal. That move would familiarize the broad public with Bhutanese concept and prevent them from acquiring it as their own. The GNH abbreviation is confused with other businesses, for example GNH Lumber²⁵, GNH Bar²⁶ or GNH Golf Carts²⁷. There is also no coherent policy to govern the use of GNH, other entities use this abbreviation for a variety of businesses. Perhaps one should be introduced?

This paper shows on which social media platforms GNH or even Bhutan is not well represented, therefore, a stronger presence there should be inflicted. Also certain public institutions should be present online, for example, The Royal Bhutan University should be more present on LinkedIn, which would strengthen Bhutan's recognition among professionals all over the world.

It is very important for entities that govern Bhutan's development to pay closer attention to electronic communication if they want to retain special character of Bhutan. It was much easier to influence traditional media when it comes to presenting certain content that strengthens traditional, built for centuries, values. It is much harder to encourage Bhutan-centred communication in social media, therefore, a lot of manpower and efforts should be directed towards building and strengthening the positive image of this Himalayan Kingdom.

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²⁵ *GNH Lumber*, <https://plus.google.com/103321505763193390375/posts>, access: 19.12.2015.

²⁶ *GNH Bar*, <https://www.facebook.com/GNHBar/?fref=nf>, access: 28.12.2015.

²⁷ *GNH Golf Carts*, <https://twitter.com/golfcarhire>, access: 29.12.2015.

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Social Media Platforms:

Facebook.com,

Google+.com,

Instagram.com,

LinkedIn.com,

Periscope.com,

Pinterest.com,

Reddit.com,

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Snapchat.com,

Tumblr.com,

Twitter.com,

Vine.com,

YouTube.com.

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Szymon Zylinski is currently Assistant Professor of Media and Social Communication at the University of Warmia and Mazury (UWM) in Olsztyn, Poland. He earned his Master of Arts in 2004 and his Ph.D. in 2011. He works in the Radio, Television, Film and New Media Research Group at the Institute of Journalism and Social Communication since 2012. His main research interests lay in the area of travel narratives through the new media perspective and foreign media systems, especially Bhutan.